

RACE FOR WEALTH.

THE

SERIES OF FIVE PICTURES

4

W. P. FRITH, R.A.

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Box III, 41 T.
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THE RACE FOR WEALTH.

HOGARTH was guided by his keen English common sense when, in casting about him for a field of his art "not before broken up in any country or age," he hit upon painted drama, choosing "subjects," as he describes them, "of a modern kind and a moral nature, intermediate between the sublime and the grotesque," i.e., as we should say, tragi-comic, and determining, in his own words, "to compose pictures on canvas similar to representations on the stage, to be tried by the same test, and criticised by the same criterion." "Let my figures," he says, "be considered as players, dressed either for the sublime "



(i.e. tragedy), "or genteel comedy, or farce —for high or low life. I have endeavoured to treat my subjects as a dramatic writer; my picture is my stage, my men and women my players, who by means of certain actions and gestures are to exhibit a dumb show."

The painter of the "Race for Wealth" follows in the track of Hogarth. These five pictures are to be looked at as the five acts of a domestic drama dealing with the real life of the day. The personages and incidents are chosen among some of the most stirring and moving passages of the great Race for Wealth which is always running before our eyes, and whose settling days are fruitful in such strange reverses, such sad and startling catastrophes. The experience of many who see these pictures will suggest but too many originals for

their personages; nay, will often be able to supply names to the actors, and time and place to the scenes.

Without further prelude, I pass to the pictures, for which, I think, may be fairly claimed a rank, in all technical respects, not inferior to the very best work of earlier years from the same indefatigable hand.

I. THE SPIDER AND THE FLIES.

We are at the centre of the spider's web—in the ante-room of the great Financier's and Projector's Offices. He is holding his levée—such levées as not many years ago were held by the Railway King, and since then have been presided over by successors administering even more colossal specula-

tions, and marshalling more millions upon paper.

The central group is made up of a graceful young woman of fashion, who presents a letter of introduction to the dispenser of fortune; while on his other side bows an obsequious foreigner, presumably a mine-agent—for this seems the spider's special line of speculation. Both aim at the blood-sucker's favour; the lady as victim, the agent as instrument or confederate. A hungry-looking, hawk-faced promoter, joint-stock scheme in hand, waits for the great man's ear. A picture-dealer has brought a picture for his approval, for "Midas has a taste," and patronises modern art. Behind this central group clerks and customers (one of them an old officer), speculators and projectors, stand in eager

talk under the light of the window, and in the foreground we see some of the bigger "flies"—a ruddy, grey-haired, kindly-faced country gentleman, in riding-dress, and a fair young widow, with her pretty boy, who is making a plaything of one of the pieces of ore, which lie temptingly about. At the opposite table a clerk, not without some touch of ruth in his young face, shows a mining map to a smooth-faced clergyman, the very outward impersonation of calm content, though, as we see here, not without his "itching palm," who, with his two daughters, is absorbed in examination of a specimen of ore, while his wife uneasily casts a backward glance at the central spinner of this golden web, to which the flies are flocking so eagerly.

Her husband is drawn strongly to the

gilded toils. *He* too is entered in the Race for Wealth. Is it for *her* to stay him?

Beyond this group, a green-horn, with sheep-face and receding forehead, under the guidance of a sharp clerk, is following the mining "locations" on one of the maps that cover the wall. The clock marks half-past eleven. Visitors can be early in the city on such business—the greener, the eagerer. Through the door communicating with the inner office you see a clerk busy at his desk, making out scrip or share for a simple-looking old victim at his side.

II. THE SPIDER AT HOME.

Midas receives. The time is the *mauvais quart d'heure* before dinner. We look

through a spacious archway from the financier's inner into his outer drawing-room, only separated from the dining-room by a corridor. The walls are closely hung with good modern pictures—we can identify work of Turner, Egg, and C. Leslie, Frank Stone, and Linnell. The decoration is not staring or overloaded ; the colour an æsthetic grey-green, with but little gilding. "Midas," as we said, "has a taste," or his furnishers and art-advisers have, which comes to the same thing. In the inner room we see full-blown Mrs. Midas, receiving her guests as they are announced by a portly white-waistcoated groom of the chambers.

One of the earlier arrivals is beginning to look at his watch, but the foreigner of the levée is too eager in talk with him to heed the flight of time. In the front room,

Midas—solemn, self-centred, self-sufficient—complacently expatiates on the beauties of a Turner to a tractable lady with a double eye-glass, who seems quite ready to take his dicta for gospel, though a bright-eyed, younger woman behind cannot refrain from smiling under shelter of her fan at the oracular æsthetics of the speculator, and the large, smooth swallow of his guest. The passage of criticism is being watched with some amusement from the other side of the room by a handsome, soldierly man, wearing the red ribbon of the Bath—a victim too—and two fashionable-looking girls—his daughters, perhaps—who occupy an ottoman in the right foreground. In the middle distance the gorgeously-dressed children of the house are being made much of by some of the ladies. Near them, a



bored guest impatiently consults his watch while appearing to listen to another, who looks like a Dissenting minister, in the back view which is all we catch of him.

Money, we see here, can command splendour, "society," fine art, and voice authoritative upon it.

Thus far the Race for Wealth is a winning one, and we see no shadow of catastrophe, no outward and visible sign of "distress" among the runners.

III. VICTIMS.

The bubble has burst ! The blow has fallen ! We are in the cosy breakfast parlour of the comfortable country rector. The morning meal is on the table, with the

central plateau of flowers that bespeaks the daughters' pride and pleasure in their home. The pictures on the wall indicate clerical ambition, suggest dreams of cathedral preferment, of deaneries and canonries, who knows ? even a bishopric, perhaps ; and, alas, side by side with these high hopes, hangs an ominous foreshadowing of shipwreck ! The bust of the great moralist looks down upon the group and reminds us of the "Vanity of Human Wishes!"

Just as the happy family were sitting down to breakfast, father, mother, and sisters in gladder contentment than usual, over the young sailor-boy, new come home, who sits in his naval cadet's jacket, the focus of the glow and light of family love, the post has brought the terrible tidings of

the crash of the mining speculation, and with it the loss of the rector's investment. The news has burst so suddenly, there has been no concealing it even from the trim servant-boy, who goes out with a sympathetic sense of the blow that has fallen on the family. The letter which has brought the stunning tidings lies at the rector's feet, where it has fallen from his unnerved hand. He sits with head bowed, in collapse ; who shall say with what bitter whisperings of self-reproach ? The poor mother reads the public tidings of disaster from the paper ; the daughters stand where they have started up, their arms round each other, as if for mutual strength and support, with the effect of the terrible tidings visible in the consternation of their strained and troubled faces, but modified



by their characters, the one braver and stronger, the other tenderer and more sympathetic.

One of the runners in the race has come to grief; well if the ruin of his fall extended no further than himself!

IV. JUDGMENT.

The stroke of Nemesis has fallen. It does not seem always, to our ken, to fall so heavily or so justly. Midas, the colossal financier, the lord of the share market, the manipulator of millions, the mighty mining speculator, stands in the Old Bailey dock, on his trial before the Lord Mayor and the Judge of the Central Criminal

Court, for a fraud that amounts to felony. We see him on the right, in the dock, with the light from the windows shining full on his worn and anxious face, his hands clasped, to check their nervous movement, on the ledge before him. In the centre of the background, under the row of windows, sit the jury, in various attitudes of weariness or attention, with faces of common-place keenness or obtuseness. Their foreman, pen in hand, takes a note, with his face turned to the witness-box, where, on the extreme right of the background, stands the rector giving evidence, with samples of the ore before him on which the issue of felonious fraud may be presumed materially to turn. In the passage between the dock and the jury-box is massed a group of witnesses, among whom

we may identify some of the leading figures of our first picture, the country squire, the half-pay officer, the widow and her boy. We may read the probable tenor of their testimony in their faces. Fronting the accused is the Bench, occupied by the Lord Mayor, the judge, and an alderman. In the Lord Mayor's face may be read the half-regretful half-reproachful feeling, induced by recollection of previous encounters with the man in the dock under very different conditions. The judge's eye is upon the counsel in the foreground, who, with his back towards the spectator, is examining the witness. In the well of the Court, under the Lord Mayor, we may see some of the guests of the dinner-party ; one, the lady with the double eye-glass, who had the benefit of Mr. Midas's lecture on

Turner. The counsel fill the foreground. The painter has shown great ingenuity in breaking the rigidity and uniformity of their position in parallel seats with their backs to the spectator, by bringing two heads into profile, and one into front view, in examination of one of the specimens of ore, to which the interrogation of the witness refers, while another, at the angle of the seats, shows his full face in the act of reading a newspaper. Close to him a famous criminal solicitor* hands a paper to one of the counsel.

In point of skill, both in painting and in dealing with difficulties of artistic arrangement, there is nothing to my thinking so remarkable in the whole series as this group of counsel learned in the law.

* Mr. G. Lewis.



The mass of black gowns and grey wigs gives great luminousness to the Court beyond.

Technically, both for variety and play of physiognomies, for skilful treatment of light and shade, and strength of dramatic interest, the lover of painting will, it is believed, dwell longer on this picture than on the three that have preceded it.

Even apart from technical merits, the mind will be likely to linger longest and most willingly on this picture, because it gives satisfaction to the sense of justice, which loves to see punishment brought down on guilty heads, and most in a case of a kind in which such retribution is rarely dealt so directly and conspicuously. The Race for Wealth has at last become

a struggle for the finish between Roguery and Retribution.

It may be of interest to know that every official personage and material feature in this picture is closely studied from the Old Bailey. The judge is Baron Huddleston; the Lord Mayor, Sir Thomas Gabriel; the Clerk of the Court, Mr. Avory. Among the counsel will be found portraits of Sergeant Ballantine (the newspaper reader), Mr. Montague Williams, in profile on the right, and Mr. Poland, the right-hand counsel examining the ore.

V. RETRIBUTION.

“Last scene of all
That ends this strange, eventful history.”

We are in one of the exercising yards of Millbank Prison. In this dismal quadrangle—looked down on by those mournful eyes, the grated windows of the cells, row above row and every one alike, without shrub or tree to break the dreary blank

of the naked space, with nothing but the rigid central lamp-post for a centre, the stone of walls and pavement and the iron of cell-gratings all around—tramp at regular intervals, six feet apart, under the sternly watchful eyes of two warders posted at opposite points of the yard, the convicts, close cropped, in their hideous suits, of brown jacket and breeches speckled with black broad-arrows, brown caps, and dark-grey stockings barred with red. Second in this rueful procession walks the potent share-king of the financier's levée, the self-complacent lecturer on æsthetics in his own sumptuous drawing-room, the cold-blooded ruiner of happy homes, the haggard convict of the Central Criminal Court dock, his prison garb, in its newness, conspicuous among the older clothing of his com-

panions of the yard, bleached with more frequent washing.

The Race for Wealth has been run. We see the end of one of "the favourites."

Perhaps if we could follow the others whom we saw entered for the race, we should find their finish, if less ignominious, hardly more happy.

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THE RACE FOR WEALTH.

BY

W. P. FRITH, R.A.

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